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Methods of Instruction in Philosophy.[1]

BY
PROFESSOR JAMES SETH, M.A.,
Professor of Moral Philosophy in the University of Edinburgh.

In a "Lecture against Lecturing," published in the *New Review*, May, 1890, and republished in his "Miscellaneous Essays and Addresses," the late Professor Sidgwick has given forcible expression to a doubt which must have occurred to some if not to all of you, and which I remember to have occurred more than once to myself as I listened to academic lectures—whether "the ordinary expository lecture, in most subjects, and so far as the most intelligent class of students are concerned," is not "an antiquated survival, a relic of the times before the printing-press was invented; maintained partly by the mere conservatism of habit and the prestige of ancient tradition, partly by the difficulty . . . of finding the right substitute for it." The traditional view of the method of academic teaching is that all that is necessary is "that the teacher and the class should be brought together in a room at a certain hour on certain days of the week . . . and that the teacher should expound his subject in a series of lectures, varying from forty-five to sixty minutes

1. An introductory lecture in the class of Moral Philosophy, University of Edinburgh, October 15, 1907.

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in length. This is the traditional, time-honoured, almost universal practice of university professors, ordinary or extraordinary, in the countries that share European civilisation; it is supported by an overwhelming consensus of opinion and practice, and most persons with whom I have spoken on the subject hardly seem able to conceive it as needing or admitting fundamental alteration." While "in England it is generally thought that academic teaching, to be effective, must include some kind of exercises written by the student and looked over by the teacher, and some kind of oral communication between the two, in the way of question and answer, in Germany the instrument of academic instruction is—in most departments of study, and so far as the majority of students are concerned—simply the lecture; and even in England it is commonly thought to be the main if not the sole educational business of a professor to expound his subject in a course of lectures." In Scotland the value of the lecture as the great method of academic instruction has been appraised even more highly than in England, and it is only quite recently, and in connection with other questions of university reform, that the question of the validity of that valuation has been raised among us. The necessity of supplementing scientific lectures by laboratory work, if not of subordinating the lecture to the laboratory form of instruction, is now generally admitted; but so far as the study of Philosophy and the Humanistic sciences is concerned, we are only awakening to the realisation of the fact that the library is the laboratory of the student of these subjects, and Professor Sidgwick's "lecture against lecturing" is specially directed against the substitution of the habit of listening to lectures for the habit of reading books on the part of the student. What is the use, he asks, of repeating in a lecture what the student can read for himself, and will do far better to read for himself, in a book? The printing-press has taken away the occupation of the old-fashioned lecturer.

Of the justice of this condemnation of the lecture, regarded as a substitute for the book, I think there can be no question. The very exception which Sidgwick allows to his general statement seems to me to be its best justification. The exception is that of "academic students who require the discipline of schoolboys. It may be necessary to drive these latter into lecture-rooms in order to increase the chance of their obtaining the required instruction somehow. I say 'increase the chance,' because it is by no means certain that young people of this turn of mind will actually drink of the fountain of knowledge, even if they are led to it daily between 10 a.m. and 1 p.m. But the compulsion may, no doubt, increase the chance of their imbibing knowledge, since it is difficult to find amusement during a lecture which will distract one's attention completely from the lecturer; although I have known instances in which the difficulty has been successfully overcome by patient ingenuity." I think you will agree with me that the ingenuity of the Scottish student, at any rate, may be trusted to find a way of overcoming the difficulty. But even if he does not do so, but has to submit to the boredom of listening to a lecture from which he cannot escape, I question whether his chance of imbibing knowledge in this way is really increased. It is one thing to take a horse to the water; it is another thing to make him drink. I firmly believe that it is even so with our academic youth, and that the sooner we give up all our old ideas about "compulsory education," whether as regards subjects of study or methods of teaching, the better will it be for education. You can no more compel a man (or a child) to know than you can compel him to goodness or religion. As Plato says, "no trace of slavery ought to mix with the studies of the freeborn man. For while the constrained performance of bodily labours exerts no evil influence upon the body, in the case of the mind no study, pursued under compulsion, remains rooted in the memory." If

the only defence of the lecture is that it is a means of compelling the student to know something about a subject which nothing would induce him to study for himself, we may as well give up the case at once. I pity the students who are lectured with this end in view; I pity still more, if possible, the professor who has to lecture them into such a pseudo-knowledge.

The true function of the lecture is discovered only when we cease to regard it as a substitute for the book, or as a self-sufficient method of education ; when we cease to regard it as the duty of the lecturer to deliver, and of the student to assimilate, a system of knowledge which might be as well, or better, derived from the study of a treatise or a set of treatises on the subject, and regard the lecture as an aid and guide to the literature of the subject. This relation of the Lecture to the Library is admirably stated by Professor Campbell Fraser in an introductory lecture to his class on "The Philosophical Class-room in the Nineteenth Century," published in a volume of "Essays in Philosophy" in 1856. The class-room should be, he says, the introduction to the library. "It should provide a key to the philosophical, and through that to the general library, and also the power to use the key." "I think I can show that it is as indispensible as ever—in some respects more so; notwithstanding the vast increase of modern books and libraries." "The very magnitude of our philosophical library is the strongest reason for asking you to pause and ponder for some months, in an academical class-room, before you make an *independent* assult upon it. Instead of uniformity in its lessons, there is much outward sign of discord. Instead of a cosmos, our books in logic and metaphysics and ethics seem on the surface to represent a chaos of opinions—a very Babel of discordant tongues . . . Perhaps I am not far wrong when I say that, as a deficiency in the number of philosophical books, and books of every sort, was the obstacle to intellectual

progress some centuries ago, so now, in this age, the obstacle is of the opposite kind. Not the absence, but the over-abundant presence of books is the evil and and temptation of these times. In other ages the mental aliment supplied by books could not be found. In this age it is pressed upon men in every form; and we are all suffering, in consequence, from intellectual indigestion." "A term of study in the modern philosophical class-room should . . . teach the true proportions and salient points of the vast mass of Philosophical Literature, which, as it were, stands in array before the student, and point out the portions in that mass where it is most important that he should effect a lodgement," or, in other words, should enable him to distinguish and to appreciate what is classical in that literature, should teach him at once what it is best worth his while to read, and how to read this part which is in reality better (for him) than the whole. It is not to be forgotten that reading is an art which, like other arts, has to be acquired, and that the acquisition of this art is the great service which a course of lectures in the subject ought to render to the student. Sidgwick's view of the superiority of the book to the lecture presupposes the knowledge of this art on the part of the student. As he himself says, "I have only in view the *élite* of academic students: the intelligent and industrious youth who have been trained from childhood in the habit of deriving ideas from books, and are able and willing to apply prolonged labour and concentrated attention to the methodical perusal of books under the direction of their teachers. My remarks have no reference to that part of the community that has never had the opportunity of acquiring a thorough mastery of the art of reading books." I think we must add that the art of reading philosophical books is an art by itself, which can hardly be acquired but through the aid of the teacher, as any one will believe who has watched the struggles of the beginner with the literature of the subject, even when this has been carefully

selected for him, or who has marked the ineradicable defects of the "self-taught" mind and the permanent harm which sometimes results from a premature and independent plunge into the sea of philosophical literature before the youth has been taught to swim in that sea or been told, by those who know, of its eddies and its currents, its deeps and its shallows.

The lecture, then, is not to be regarded as an end in itself, but only as a means to a further and better end; its value is instrumental, not final. Its function is to provide the introduction to the subject, to make possible the independent study of its literature, to initiate the student into its mysteries, but nothing more. Both the teacher and the student need to be reminded of this essential limitation of its function. Whenever a higher or more permanent value is attached to it, whenever it is allowed to stand between the student and the literature, whenever it becomes the medium of the conveyance of a ready-made system from the mind of the lecturer to that of the student, its essential purpose is defeated, and it becomes an evil rather than a good. Hence the shortness of its lease of life. The student is always outgrowing it, the lecture is always superseding itself; and the true lecturer will rejoice in this self-effacement, will see in this loss of his occupation the very crown of his labours. And when he meets, in an honours class, "the *élite* of academic students," he will probably refuse to lecture to them, and will insist upon their regarding him rather as their fellow-student than as their teacher in the old sense. He will recognise that the time for the lecture has passed, and that the time for the laboratory or *seminar* method has arrived. The time for the lecture is at the beginning of the study of the subject; its value even at that stage is merely instrumental; once that stage is passed, once the student has been introduced to the subject, it loses even that instrumental value, and arrests rather than promotes his further progress.

But wherein, it will still be asked, lies the peculiar value of the lecture as an introduction to the subject? Wherein consists its superiority to the printed treatise? The answer is that its value is that of the spoken, as distinguished from that of the written word. This is suggested by Sidgwick's exceptions to the general condemnation which he passes upon the lecture. The lecture which he condemns is the merely expository lecture, that is, the lecture whose object is merely to convey information. Among the lectures which he excepts are "lectures of which the method is dialectic and not simply expository," and "lectures on any subject whatever that are intended to stimulate interest rather than to convey information;" and he acknowledges "the counterbalancing advantages which the listener's position has as compared with the reader's." He further admits that "it may be fairly urged that the line which I have tried to draw, between lectures designed to arouse interest and lectures designed to give information, is only partially tenable; since a good lecture will stimulate while informing, more than the same discourse would do if printed, through the effect of personal presence and utterance in stirring intellectual sympathy." The object of a philosophical lecture is so to state the question as to arouse the student's interest in it, to make it his own question, and thus to set him thinking about it for himself—to arouse philosophic thought by arousing interest in the problems of philosophic thought.

The superiority of the lecture to the book as an educational instrument in this respect lies in the appeal which the former makes to the collective mind of the class, to the social rather than to the merely individual consciousness. The lecture makes its appeal to the class as a whole, and the class as a whole responds to its appeal. The result is a heightening of the intellectual consciousness of the individual, parallel to that heightening (or deepening) of the emotional or moral consciousness of

the individual produced by the appeal of the preacher or the orator. As Professor Campbell Fraser has said in the lecture from which I have already quoted, "Colleges and universities are meant to be centres of attraction, for collecting together numbers of persons, in order that they may accomplish collectively, and through social study, what cannot so well be accomplished in isolation. They are social organisations created for maintaining and promoting the higher and more difficult class of studies. They assume that *social* study has many advantages, of which *solitary* study is destitute. They profess to provide a special system of means for rendering social study effective." It is this "collision of mind with mind" that constitutes the peculiar service of a university to its individual members. "In all the arrangements of the class," therefore, Professor Fraser continues, "I seek to evoke that mental sympathy or contagion, which is apt, by the very manifestation of an earnest wrestling with the doubts and difficulties of these studies, to be communicated from one mind to another. Indeed, the word sympathy does not express the sufficient meaning. The mental world is pervaded by a kind of mystic influence. The social or sympathetic action of all adds to the intensity of the mental power of each. There is, I think, a kind of organic intellectual life in the human species, and in sections or societies of it, which influences the intellectual life of each member."

The style of the lecture, or spoken word, ought accordingly to be very different from that of the book, or written word. Its distinguishing quality ought to be its directness, its conversational character. The ideal lecture is a conversation with the class; it is a dialogue, not a monologue. It is true that the lecturer must have the lion's share of the conversation, in the literal sense. But he must never forget to listen to the difficulties and objections of the class, even though these may be unexpressed. He ought to *see* them in the faces before

him, even when he does not *hear* them stated. He ought to put himself sufficiently at the point of view of the class to be able to anticipate the class's difficulties and objections, and to answer them as he proceeds. The lecture is not, or ought not to be, stereotyped like the book; it should be a fresh effort to present the question, and the answer, to this particular class; it ought to be a statement, or a restatement, of the question as the lecturer now sees it and wants the present class to see it with him, It is this free, direct, conversational character that constitutes the peculiar value of the lecture as an instrument of education.

And why should not the conversation, occasionally at least, become literal? Why should not the class express its difficulties, where the lecturer has failed, as he constantly must fail, to anticipate them? Is not the advantage of the living teacher, as compared with the book, that, as Plato said, you can ask questions of the one and not of the other? Sidgwick emphasises "the importance, for progress in philosophy, of stating perplexities clearly and precisely. The art that has to be learnt in order to achieve this result, he says, has been called the art of "concentrating fog." "In the earlier stages of philosophical study, fog is sure to arise from time to time . . . An intellectual fog, like a physical fog, is very pervasive, and liable rapidly to envelope large portions of a subject even when its original source really lies in a very limited and not very important difficulty. The great thing, therefore, is to concentrate it." But, he objects, "the one thing that the lecturer cannot allow is the pause for reflection: he must go on talking." I fail to see why he must do so. Why not stop, and allow the class a chance to express its perplexities, and himself a chance to hear and answer them? I have found nothing more stimulating, both to the class and to myself, than such "pauses for reflection" and discussion in the midst of a lecture. If my ideal of the lecture as a conversation

between the lecturer and the class is the true one, then the more literal the conversation can be made the better.

Here, again, it is necessary that both the lecturer and the student should guard against the mistaken idea that the lecture is an end in itself. The student, especially, is in constant danger of forgetting its merely instrumental value; he wants the lecturer to do his thinking for him. He assumes an attitude of passive aquiescence in what is presented to him, forgetting that the very object of a philosophical course is to teach him to think for himself, to weigh evidence and form his own judgment on the ultimate questions of human experience, and that conclusions which he has not reached for himself have no value for him. The constant aim of the lecture should be not to save the student the trouble of thinking, but to stimulate him to think for himself. If this object of a philosophical education is to be attained, the lecture must be supplemented not only by independent reading on the part of the individual student, but by discussion, whether formal or informal, by the class as a whole. Only in this way can the lecture be kept in its proper place, and the social value of academic study be fully realised.

Discussion is an invaluable aid to reflection, an indispensable instrument of thought. It has been truly said that discussion is only "thinking writ large." It is social, as distinguished from individual, thinking. Plato tells us that all thinking is really conversation, the conversation of the mind with itself. And the conversation is always of a controversial character; it has always an affirmative and a negative side. It is only thus, Plato would say, by allowing the affirmative and negative to fight it out between them, that truth on any subject can be reached. Thought, in other words, is always critical: the criticism comes inevitably from within, if not from without. But the mind of the individual is always more or less languid and uncritical, always more or less partial to one side of the question, more easily acquiescent in

some particular view. Not sufficiently self-critical, it needs the criticism of others. The conversation of the soul with itself is apt to be far too friendly; it is too apt to become a monologue. It is a great advantage to have the other points of view represented by other people. Social discussion is generally more effective than solitary discussion; the literal conversation is generally more useful, as well as more interesting, than the metaphorical.

Plato has signalised for all time the distinction between two types of discussion, or between discussion and debate—between that which is inspired by no higher motive than the desire to influence opinion, to make your own opinion prevail, and the true type whose object is the discovery of truth; between mere Eristic and true Dialectic. The former is the method of the Sophists, the professors of the art of persuasion in the dicastery and in the public assembly; the latter is the method of Socrates, the seeker after truth. And if you would realise the value of the Socratic discussion as an aid to individual reflection, you have only to read a dialogue of Plato. You feel immediately the contrast between the earnestness of the Socratic love of truth and the Sophistic indifference to truth and love of victory. The procedure of the one is unprincipled, it is willing to pay any price for victory; that of the other is scrupulously loyal to truth, always ready to follow where the argument leads, even when it leads, as it generally does, to confusion and self-contradiction and the realisation of our ignorance of what we had seemed to know. The function of the argument is to show those who take part in it the difference between knowledge and mere opinion which mistakes itself for knowlege; the function of Socrates himself was to exhibit the confusion and self-contradiction of all unexamined and uncritical opinion. And the result of the process is at once positive and negative; the elimination of error is at the same time the discovery of truth. In such discussion it is a matter of unconcern on which side

victory ultimately rests; he whose object is not personal triumph, but the triumph of the truth, will court defeat if defeat brings with it a larger and clearer vision of truth. Plato sets before us in sharpest contrast the vanity and conceit of the self-seeking Sophists and the humility of Socrates, the disciple of truth.

The result of such true discussion is not so much the establishment of any single opinion as true, or the refutation of any other as false—the definite triumph of one side and the definite defeat of the other—as the clearing up of our conceptions on the subject under discussion, the exhibition of the grounds of our opinions or of their groundlessness. The difference between mere opinion and knowledge is rather a difference of form than of content. Knowledge is just opinion which can give an account of itself, which can show its grounds. When Socrates insists that the Sophists know nothing, he does not mean that all their opinions are necessarily wrong; he only means that they have no intellectual right to these opinions, no security for their truth. When he insists that he also knows nothing, he does not mean that he has no correct opinions, or even that he is entirely ignorant of the grounds of his opinions, but merely that he is unable to show all the grounds which underlie any one of these opinions, to give a complete account of any of them. Now it is the function of my opponent in discussion, who represents the opposite opinion, to bring home to me the weakness of my intellectual position, to compel me either to show the grounds of my opinion or to confess its groundlessness. It is, of course, equally my duty and my privilege to do my opponent the same service. It is by this conflict of opinions, by this social scrutiny of their grounds, that intellectual progress is alone possible. Thus we can understand the function of the mediæval *advocatus diaboli*. He seemed a mere devil's advocate, a mere spirit of denial, a destroyer of the truth. In reality he was God's advocate, the friend

of truth. His function was to test opinions, to compel men to try all things and hold fast only those which were true, and not to rest content with anything short of an understanding of their truth. It was with a wise insight into the nature of knowledge that the mediæval universities tested the intellectual attainments of their students by compelling them to "dispute" frequently during their course, and finally to conduct a formal "disputation," to defend some thesis obvious enough in itself, but difficult to establish by reduction to its grounds. A better test not only of the student's mastery of any particular subject, but of his general intellectual power, could hardly be conceived.

Discussion, we may say, socialises the intellect, which has an individualism of its own. We have seen that its result is rather to compel us to take our opponent's point of view than to compel him to take ours. We must, in any case, take our opponent's point of view provisionally: we must understand his objections, if we are to answer them; and to understand his objections we must, for the time being, take his point of view. And as for the final outcome, we learn to agree, if it is only to agree to differ. We discover the *grounds* of our difference, and to that extent we agree; we discover some common ground, even if it be only a ground of difference. The best result of the best discussion is not that either disputant is converted to the side of his opponent, but that each so far persuades the other of the reasonableness of his view that each modifies his original position in the direction of the objections offered to it by the other, that is, in the direction of the other's view; and the greater the extent of the common ground from which the discussion starts, the greater is the likelihood of such a result. All discussion is, in a sense, belligerent or polemical; but we must remember that neither side has a monopoly of truth, that the alternatives of thought are rather complementary than mutually exclusive. The

chief object of discussion is not mutual refutation, but mutual understanding. When we succeed in understanding one another, we shall agree with one another; it is only because it is so difficult to understand one another that it is so difficult to agree. "I am confident," says Mr. Bradley, "that none of us has ideas so absurd that, when understood, they should have no truth."

One of the most frequent causes of misunderstanding is the ambiguity of language; one of the chief causes of our failure to understand one another, and even ourselves, is the different meanings which we attach to the same words. A word ought to be the sign and symbol of a thought, and the same word ought to stand for the same thought. Yet how imperceptibly the word changes its meaning; what different things the same word may mean for different persons, and even for the same person at different times. How easily, how almost inevitably, we become the slaves of words. As one of our Scottish phillosophers has quaintly put it: "As a servant that is extremely useful and necessary to his master by degrees acquires an authority over him, so that the master must yield to the servant, such is the case with regard to language. Its intention is to be a servant to the understanding; but it is so useful and so necessary that we cannot avoid being sometimes led by it when it ought to follow." The ambiguity of which I speak may lurk in the most familiar words. An eminent living philosopher speaks, in pathetic tones, of "the fatal ambiguity of the word 'of.'"

It is often said, accordingly, that most of our controversies are mere logomachies, disputes about words. If, however, the result of the discussion is the arrival at anything like agreement in the use of the terms in question, this is a distinct intellectual gain. Terms are the expression of concepts, and a clear understanding of their significance is impossible without clear conceptions of the subject under discussion. To take refuge in the

mere word is the habit of the man who is tired of thinking for himself, and it is the challenge which discussion raises to come out of this refuge of lies that constitutes its peculiar value. Such a challenge it was that Socrates offered to his contemporaries, and that distinguished him from the Sophists. The Sophists trained their pupils to use words so skilfully that their hearers would be persuaded that they knew all about all the subjects about which they could talk, that their wisdom was equal to their fluency. Socrates asked the Sophists what they *meant* by these large and impressive words, and showed that they meant very different things at different times, and that it was impossible to use the terms consistently until they had learnt to think consistently. Discussion of the Socratic type emancipates us from the slavery of words, because it compels us to think for ourselves. It has been truly said that "language is mainly a storehouse of old and imperfect theory, a record of early attempts to deal with to-day's problems from a lower general point of view than is open to us to-day. . . . If knowledge is progressive, this means that at any given date there is something faulty in existing knowledge as crystallised in language." The best result of "conference" or discussion is not that "readiness" which Bacon places to its credit but that "exactness" which is no less its fruit than that of writing.

Finally, I would remind you that in your discussions here you are preparing yourselves for the practical work of life. Discussion has not merely a theoretical but a tremendous practical significance. In theory, at all events, the conduct of our political, no less than that of our intellectual life, is by discussion. Parliamentary government is government by discussion. In a democratic country it is public opinion that controls the destinies of the nation, and it is he who can form and educate public opinion who is the true statesman. The politician is the disciple of public opinion: the statesman is its teacher. The discussions of Parliament are conducted in the

presence not only of Parliament itself but of the whole nation, and even when these discussions do not influence the vote of Parliament, they constitute an appeal to that public opinion at whose bar every vote is ultimately compelled to justify itself. More and more are all the acts of our national life compelled to give an account of themselves to the nation itself. And in practical questions it is not so difficult to get at the true worth of opinions, to determine, at any rate, which is the sounder and the truer. Yet how much playing to the gallery, how common the appeal to the prejudice and self-interest of the individual or the class, rather than to unprejudiced and unselfish judgment as to the common good. How frequent the *argumentum ad hominem;* how rare the *argumentum ad rem.* How constantly mere words, the very fossils of thought, the mere relics of past thought, are substituted for actual thinking, here no less than in more purely intellectual discussions. When the true disputant makes his appearance among such sophistic disputers, he is bound to get a hearing, if not from them then from the true mind of the nation; he is bound to influence, if not the votes of his colleagues in Parliament, then the votes of the nation in choosing its Parliament, if not at this election, then at some later election. As our Lord Rector[1] has more than once insisted, and as we cannot be too often reminded, the great need of this and of every nation is sound thinking on the part of its statesmen and of its citizens alike. And what is the use of an academic education, above all of an education in Philosophy, if it does not teach us to think?

1. The Right Hon. R. B. Haldane, Secretary of State for War.